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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 002174

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA: XENOPHOBIA VICTIMS FACE EVICTION
FROM CAMPS

REF: A. PRETORIA 1563
[1](#)B. PRETORIA 2014

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Summary

[1](#)1. (U) At Camp Akasia sheltering foreigners displaced by xenophobic attacks in May, the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG) dispatched a private security crew to confiscate army tents from residents, leaving hundreds of men, women, and children without shelter. The action was deplored by UNHCR and Lawyers for Human Rights, who stressed GPG's duty to formulate an actionable plan to reintegrate foreigners into local communities. A week later GPG demolished three more camps, leaving hundreds more migrants stranded, in defiance of NGO appeals and a previous High Court order barring such evictions. While GPG's statements of its intent were conflicting, it appeared to have deliberately pressured migrants to vacate the camps and fend for themselves. End Summary.

Reported "Red Ants" Raid

[1](#)2. (U) On September 23 an estimated 800 foreign migrants were left without formal shelter at Camp Akasia northwest of Pretoria (ref A), when security forces contracted by the city council dismantled and hauled away the army tents that had housed them since the outbreak of xenophobic violence last May. The tents were taken down by Red Ants Security Services, a security firm named for its workers' red uniforms and known for its tough tactics. Red Ants are typically brought in by the government during tense standoffs, such as razing of squatter dwellings or strike actions by labor unions. Newspapers described the camp residents as scrambling to collect their belongings into makeshift shelters of wood frames covered with blankets and black garbage bags. Reportedly the GPG's rationale was that the army needed its tents back. Migrants' representatives were quoted as saying they had received no advance warning of the action.

UNHCR Deplores GPG Action; LHR Appeals for Plan

13. (U) UNHCR Spokesman Yusuf Hassan decried the GPG's confiscation of tents as "unacceptable" and "inexcusable," adding that UNHCR would seek to meet as soon as possible with provincial authorities to remind them of their responsibilities to the internally displaced persons (IDPs). "There is an urgent need for these people to be housed," he was quoted as saying. "There should have been discussions about alternative accommodation, but there was none.... Closures need to be carefully planned and are definitely not done like this."

14. (U) In a September 23 communiqu  refugee advocacy group Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) assailed the "intimidation tactics" at Camp Akasia, urging the GPG to formulate a cogent plan for resolution of the IDP camp situation. Acknowledging that the camps were not a long-term answer and should be closed eventually, LHR highlighted the lack of any clear plan to achieve that. GPG efforts to pave the way for reconciliation and reintegration in townships were scant: "While we note that government agents have been working on the ground to investigate conditions in the communities, this appears to have been on an ad hoc basis with no formal plan in place." As a result, "there are still large numbers who fear returning to communities." LHR called on the GPG to "fear returning to communities." LHR called on the GPG to cease all threats and reminded it of a Constitutional Court order barring eviction of IDP camp residents.

Residents Traumatized, Anxious

15. (U) On a September 26 visit by Emboffs to Camp Akasia, the mood was anxious. Poloffs met with camp managers, the UNHCR site representative, and many of the migrants. Red Ants had

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seized 47 tents, which were then replaced with tents from UNHCR. Residents were traumatized and deeply fearful. Some lacked access to necessary medication. No one was prepared for a closure of the camp, which they had been told would occur on September 30.

More Evictions Denied -- Then Conducted

16. (U) Gauteng gave verbal assurances there would be no camp closures, which it then contradicted with the demolitions. Akasia residents said a parliamentary task team had visited their camp and promised to help the IDPs decide their own courses of action -- without any warning of camp demolition. On September 29 GPG spokesperson Thabo Masebe assured us unequivocally that no camps would be forcibly closed the next day. That evening Masebe left the country, so he was unavailable for comment the next day when GPG's Red Ants proceeded to dismantle remaining camps at Glenanda, Boksburg, and Rand Airport, leaving residents stranded in the same manner as at Akasia. After witnessing the confiscation of tents, NGOs were appalled by GSG's transparent excuses that residents were leaving of their own volition.

7.(U) On October 1 Emboffs visited the remains of Boksburg and Rand Airport camps. At Boksburg, which housed migrants mainly from neighboring Zimbabwe and Mozambique, GPG official William Mtsanwisi said the majority of camp residents had opted for repatriation, some groups hiring trucks for transport using the small stipends of R 500 - 1,200 (\$60 - \$150, depending on the size of the family) handed out by the U.N. and GPG. The Department of Home Affairs was also on site offering assistance to any migrant wishing to repatriate. The Red Cross donated food parcels of canned and dry goods. At Rand Airport, which had housed largely Zimbabweans, large numbers of former camp residents milled

about the area while officials from the Zimbabwean Embassy were assisting with repatriation.

No Way Out: Onward Options Problematic

18. (U) All options for these IDPs -- reintegration to townships, voluntary repatriation to countries of origin, involuntary deportation, or resettlement in third countries -- involve risks and difficulties. While some areas of the Cape have successfully returned foreigners to their township homes after securing community buy-in, Gauteng province has made little attempt to sensitize or secure host communities, and returnees have been attacked and even murdered. A Somali man told us that four of his extended family members had been killed in their community the night before our visit. Repatriation was also considered too dangerous for most, who had come to South Africa to escape the ravages of war or famine at home. UNHCR was accepting applications in Pretoria for asylum resettlement, but without any special measures to assist these victims of xenophobia.

COMMENT: Forcing A Solution, Come What May

19. (SBU) The Gauteng government, reluctant to establish the IDP camps in the first place, has consistently been keen to be rid of them in whatever way possible. Earlier efforts to Qbe rid of them in whatever way possible. Earlier efforts to close them were blocked by the Constitutional Court in response to appeals by a consortium of refugee and rights NGOs (ref B). In August, Lawyers for Human Rights advocate Jacob van Garderen privately shared his opinion with us that the provincial strategy was one of attrition, i.e. to wait for migrants gradually to disperse and the issue to fade away. Recent camp demolitions suggest a stepped-up, more aggressive version of that attrition approach: Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) program coordinator Alexis Moens suggested to the press that Gauteng deliberately made camp conditions unlivable so as to precipitate departures. Through this action the GPG has acted in defiance of the High Court order, of UN and NGO appeals, of its humanitarian duties, and of the risk of renewed violence as foreigners filter back to townships. End Comment.

LA LIME